



Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor · Dennis R. Schrader, Acting Secretary

Behavioral Health Administration
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February 5, 2021

Dear Behavioral Health Partners:

Happy Black History Month! I hope that you are interested in learning about some notable Black Americans in the field of mental health, and if so, I refer you to [MHA's Black Pioneers In Mental Health](#).

Our commitment to celebrating Black History Month cannot be divorced from a continued focus and action towards racial justice and equity in all areas of life for the BIPOC community. Achieving equity is only possible if we all get off the side-lines and engage in this very important work, if we see the need for change not only outside of ourselves, but in our individual actions as well as in our places of work and play. Last year, the Behavioral Health Administration (BHA) started a **Behavioral Health Equity Workgroup** that has served as a source of support and education for our diverse workforce. We are committed to lead with an equity lens and continue to work towards focusing our administration on equitable actions and outcomes. I am proud to announce that, in partnership with Dr. Noel Brathwaite of MDH's Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities, I will be co-leading the **Racial Disparities Task Force**, the newest addition to the Lt. Governor's Interagency Opioid Coordinating Council. The task force is in the early stages of development at this time. I am excited about being able to partner with Dr. Brathwaite to halt the continued escalation of opioid overdose deaths in the Black community.

Maryland is now in **Phase 1C of the vaccine distribution plan**, which includes critical workers in high-risk settings and residents 65 and over. More than 100 active providers are listed on covidvax.maryland.gov, and Marylanders may also call 211 for assistance. Vaccinations are by appointment only. Through the federal long-term care program, CVS and Walgreens are conducting vaccination clinics at Maryland nursing homes and assisted living facilities. If you have a question about a specific facility, [contact the Maryland Department of Health](#).

Since my January communication, we were able to distribute some communications on the **monoclonal antibodies treatment (mAb)**. Monoclonal antibodies are laboratory-made proteins that mimic our natural antibodies' ability to fight viruses such as COVID-19. The two products available in Maryland under the FDA's emergency use authorization (EUA) are [Bamlanivimab](#) and [Casirivimab and Imdevimab](#). Together Dr. Howard Haft and I are co-leading the State's monoclonal antibody initiative. You can find more information on the links below:

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- [FAQs about Monoclonal Antibody Treatment for COVID-19](#)
- [Provider resources on Monoclonal Antibodies](#)

I encourage all of our providers to learn more about this form of treatment for mild/moderate COVID-19 disease for the target population, those over 65 years of age or younger with certain comorbidities. Monoclonal antibodies have been shown to decrease the need for hospitalization due to COVID-19, and as you all are aware, people with behavioral health conditions (especially substance use disorders and schizophrenia) are at an increased risk of developing severe disease from COVID-19, including an increased risk of death. Please advocate for treatment for your patients, if they meet criteria.

We continue to encourage everyone to get vaccinated when you become eligible, to help your patients get vaccinated, and to promote the efficacy and safety of the vaccines throughout your community so that we might diminish the fear and anxiety associated with the vaccines. We encourage you to visit the recently launched [GoVAX Campaign](#) site for more information and resources. Please keep informed and share vaccination information with your patients and community, which can be found at coronavirus.maryland.gov. Only together can we limit the spread of COVID-19 and save lives.

In a recent [letter to Governors](#), Acting Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Norris Cochran stated the following about the public health emergency (PHE) for COVID-19: “The current PHE was renewed effective January 21, 2021, and will be in effect for 90 days. To assure you of our commitment to the ongoing response, we have determined that the PHE will likely remain in place for the entirety of 2021, and when a decision is made to terminate the declaration or let it expire, HHS will provide states with 60 days’ notice prior to termination.” The PHE declaration has been critical for allowing many of the telehealth flexibilities granted during the pandemic to continue. We will continue to keep you informed of any changes to this status.

Over the course of the last month, we were able to provide an updated **FAQ**, which was posted on our website and can be found here: [Telehealth FAQ January 19](#).

The **BHA/MedChi Behavioral Health Webinar Series: Helping the Helpers and Those They Serve**, and the **Friday Provider Webinars with Public Health** continue to be well-received. The Friday Provider Webinar series continues weekly at 10:00 a.m. If you need any assistance in joining these webinars, contact bha.inquiries@maryland.gov.

The **BHA/MedChi Webinar Series: Helping the Helpers and Those They Serve** webinars for February are as follows:

- February 11: **Balancing Work and Parenting During the COVID-19 Pandemic**
Kelly Coble, LCSW-C. Moderator: Shanta Powell, MD.
[Register here](#)
- February 25: **How to Address, Manage, and Heal from the Racial Microaggressions Experienced by Health Care Workers in Everyday Life**
Stephanie Slowly, MSW, LCSW-C. Moderator: Shanta Powell, MD.
[Register here](#)

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You can find more information about each of these webinars at <https://bha.health.maryland.gov/Pages/bhamedchi-behavioralhealthwebinarseries.aspx>.

BHA continues to provide behavioral health speakers for the Maryland Department of Health's Maryland Primary Care Program's **(MDPCP) webinar for primary care providers**. You can register for these at [the MDPCP webpage](#). This is also where recordings and slides of previous webinars are archived.

Please note upcoming BHA trainings and conferences:

- February 17: **Telebehavioral Health Best Practices Webinar**:
https://stateofdelaware.csod.com/LMS/catalog/Welcome.aspx?tab_page_id=67&tab_id=20000401
- March 9: **BHA presents Maryland's 17th Annual Child, Adolescent and Young Adult Services Conference: *Integrating Clinical Interventions Within A Behavioral Health Approach***
<https://ww2.eventrebels.com/er/Registration/StepRegInfo.jsp?ActivityID=35643&StepNumber=1&v=M2VkJMTRhNzktYTAxOC00MwQzLTgwZTEtZWE4MzExYjZjZTM1>

Operation Courage is now available! This is a new support services program designed to address the long-term mental health care needs of frontline workers and first responders amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Operation Courage offers an online assessment followed by a free consultation, which includes an initial 15-20 minute conversation, de-escalation for people experiencing an immediate crisis, and may include recommendations for self-care or referrals to other services, depending on the level of need. After the initial call, people who decide to engage are then offered therapy consisting of an evaluation, treatment plan, psychotherapy and ongoing assessments as needed. [Learn more.](#)

Invitations have gone out to various stakeholders to join the **Crisis System Advisory Workgroup**. This multidisciplinary group will work to review, reimagine and develop state, regional, and local efforts to build-out the statewide crisis system. They are charged with exploring the current array of crisis services around the state, developing uniform crisis services definitions with specific language pertaining to crisis, and bringing eligible crisis services into the fee-for-service reimbursement structure. We look forward to convening this workgroup to help us get closer to the day when all of Maryland's citizens are able to receive appropriate behavioral health crisis services and supports, wherever they might be.

We appreciate the great response we received on our **first two surveys** on individuals receiving behavioral health services in Maryland during the COVID-19 pandemic. We posted the latest survey results on the [BHA COVID resources webpage](#). We released a third survey on January 25, and we are accepting responses through next Monday, February 8. Please continue to support this effort that enables us to be responsive to community needs. Based upon the common challenges reported in the first two survey results, BHA recently shared some recommendations through a Provider Alert to help providers assist individuals with connecting to and remaining in treatment. Our goal is to help you to diminish any fears consumers/patients may have in connecting with services, respond to any barriers that arise during treatment, and address unfamiliarity or anxiety related to telehealth services.

Regarding the ongoing **ASO transition**, a Provider Alert will be forthcoming clarifying uninsured eligibility. MDH and BHA continue to work with Optum to address provider and system-wide issues to

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provide improved stability to our provider community. We continue to appreciate your partnership and feedback.

The **Multi-Agency Opioid Overdose Prevention Strategy workgroup** continues to be a resource in helping us mitigate against the continued increases in opioid overdose deaths. We encourage you to read the [Opioid Operational Command Center's \(OCC\) Third Calendar Quarter Report](#) to get an update on Maryland's latest statistics and performance as it pertains to opioids.

I am pleased to report that **BHA's HUD Continuum of Care Grant Awards for 2020** were renewed for a total award of \$5,269,837. These awards provide tenant and leasing based rental assistance to assist individuals who have a serious mental illness or co-occurring disorders and families experiencing homelessness, particularly those living in places not meant for habitation and in shelters with obtaining permanent supportive housing. Congratulations to BHA's Clinical Services team!

I am also pleased to announce that BHA recently was awarded several other grants. They include:

- \$537,800 awarded from SAMHSA/FEMA to provide crisis counseling under the Regular Services Program. BHA has launched a digital messaging campaign to provide much needed information to frontline workers and first responders. Thank you, Darren McGregor, and Stephanie Slowly and team!
- \$247,702.24 awarded from Vibrant Emotional Health to support Maryland's 9-8-8 implementation planning process. In July 2022, 9-8-8 will become the national suicide prevention crisis hotline. Thanks to Kathleen Rebbert-Franklin and team!

BHA providers and stakeholders, I sincerely appreciate your ongoing commitment, support, and partnership in our efforts to support community wellness. Thank you for continuing to be an advocate for an integrated system of care that continues to build on a shared vision of equity for all of Maryland's citizens. And for now, please continue to wear a mask, wash your hands, keep social distance, and get your COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Aliya Jones, M.D., MBA
Deputy Secretary Behavioral Health